

GOLD AND FRANKINCENSE
A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
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Today is Epiphany in the Christian Calendar. January 6 is the end of the Twelve Days of Christmas, and it's usually celebrated by recounting the visit of the wise men from the East to the baby Jesus, bringing gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh.ⁱ I'm suggesting that we as well should give away these gifts to begin the New Year. Not literally, but in terms of turning away from materialism, growing up our faith, and living every day as if it's our last. For, as we learned in singing John Henry Hopkins' nineteenth century carol, "We Three Kings of Orient Are," to begin this service, giving gold away leads to an emphasis on love, incense encourages us through our senses to pray and praise anew, and myrrh as embalming oil reminds us that death is always on our shoulder, so we should live fully with wonder in the present.

Let's start with the biblical story of gold and frankincense, referenced in both our Old Testamentⁱⁱ and New Testamentⁱⁱⁱ lessons for the day, with myrrh added in the passage from Matthew. The sixtieth chapter of Isaiah was written by what many scholars have called Third Isaiah, a prophet or prophets who lived in Jerusalem after the Jewish people's return from Babylonian exile in 539 B.C.^{iv} "Arise, shine; for your light has come...Lift up your eyes and look around...your sons shall come from far away."^v Jewish exiles are continuing to return from Babylon, and the prophet predicts that soon Jerusalem will be wealthy and prosperous again^{vi}: "Your heart shall thrill and rejoice, because the abundance of the sea shall be brought to you, the wealth of the nations shall come to you." The great temple in Jerusalem, which had been destroyed by the Babylonians, is being rebuilt,^{vii} paid for with gold, and incense (frankincense)

was needed for worship there.^{viii} Frankincense wasn't native to ancient Israel, but came from a gum resin extracted from trees on the Arabian Peninsula and northeast Africa.^{ix} Hence, Third Isaiah writes, "A multitude of camels shall cover you, the young camels of Midian and Ephah; all those from Sheba shall come. They shall bring gold and frankincense, and shall proclaim the praise of the Lord."^x

In the Gospel of Matthew, we learn that the wise men from the East who come to see Jesus give him gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh. Myrrh is also derived from a tree resin from Arabia and northeast Africa and is prized for its fragrance. It was used in religious ceremonies but also for burials. According to the Greek writer, Herodotus, the Egyptians used myrrh in preparation of human mummies, a practice that pre-dated Jesus' birth by thousands of years.^{xi} There've been many reasons cited historically why gold, frankincense and myrrh might be brought to Jesus: First, the literary background of Isaiah 60, where more than 500 years before Jesus there had been great hope for the nation of Israel after the Babylonian exile.^{xii} These were also appropriate gifts for royalty, and the wise men were searching for one they called the king of the Jews.^{xiii} Gold, frankincense and myrrh were also practical gifts with many uses, from simple currency to medicinal uses. Egyptian papyrus writing dating to 1500 B.C. recommends both frankincense and myrrh resins for treatment of wounds. Modern research has found them useful for gastrointestinal disorders and arthritis, and they are still common ingredients in perfumes and cosmetics.^{xiv}

The biblical text, however, has been dramatically enhanced by later traditions within Christianity. There is no evidence that the wise men were kings, as described in the carol "We Three Kings." Nor were they necessarily three. There was no number of wise men specified in the gospel story. Also, there was no symbolism even hinted at in Matthew's gospel about the meaning of gold, frankincense and myrrh.^{xv} The most common symbolism later developed was

that gold was given for Jesus as king; frankincense for Jesus as divine, from its use as incense in religious worship; and myrrh for Jesus dying, since it was used in embalming.^{xvi} Then, the later tradition specifying the number of wise men comes from the gospel's stating that three gifts were brought. If it had been only gold and frankincense, as described in Isaiah, then presumably the tradition would have grown that there were only two wise men. The Golden Legend, a medieval compilation of folklore about Christian feast days, including Epiphany, cites six different meanings that had been attributed to the gospel story's gold, frankincense and myrrh. A fascinating one is attributed to St. Bernard: "For they offered to Mary, the mother of the child, gold for to relieve her poverty, incense against the stench of the stable and evil air, myrrh for to comfort the tender members of the child and to put away vermin."^{xvii}

Today I want to build off the most traditional symbolism, though, in my suggestions that starting on this Epiphany we should turn away from materialism, grow up our faith, and live every day as if it's our last.

First, gold, of course, has been the most long-standing symbol of wealth and power. We may have left the gold standard for our currency in the United States in the 1970's, but it's still considered by many to be the most reliable investment for long-term value. Biblically, great figures like Abraham^{xviii} were rich in gold, Moses was commanded by God to cover the Ark of the Covenant with gold^{xix}, and Solomon overlaid the temple in Jerusalem with gold.^{xx} However, there's also an anti-gold strand that starts with the worship of the golden calf by the Israelites when Moses is receiving the Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai.^{xxi} Early in the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011, clergy protesters carried a golden calf named "Greed" around Zuccotti Square and then held an interfaith prayer service.^{xxii} As Rev. Donna Schaper of Judson Memorial Church, who has preached from this pulpit, explained in the *Huffington Post*, "They marched and carried because they know what idolatry is...The 99% don't have an enemy in the 1% so much as

a need to bring money in line with human values... We went for the basics of our many faiths, the golden rule which is so distanced from and by the golden calf. "Do unto those downstream from you what you would have those upstream from you do to you." This rule applies to hippies, Republicans, church members, ministers, and financiers."^{xxiii}

An Episcopal priest, Martin L. Smith, writing in the current edition of *Sojourner's Magazine*, sees Epiphany as "a manifestation of Christ present in all those children today who cry out for sustained and practical support, social reform that gives every family economic sufficiency, adequate sanitary housing, and basic health services." Just as the wise men offered money, fumigation, and medication to the Christ child, "the controlling forces that dictate the current unjust social order must be confronted with God's radical order that ensures that... basic human needs... are met."^{xxiv}

Second, the gift of frankincense suggests to me a new kind of spirituality that joins head and heart, biblical text and later-developing traditions, the historical and the legendary, the scientific and the poetic. Mature faith, as distinguished from the wonder of childhood, needs to make sense of all that we know in our lives and experience, rather than becoming "blind faith" or a "leap of faith." If we grow up our faith beyond childhood and adolescence, it's possible to find a new simplicity on the far side of complexity, as Oliver Wendell Holmes and Alfred North Whitehead both described it^{xxv} – one that recognizes scientific and historical reality as well as the aesthetic and transcendent dimensions of being human. In this sense, I've been intrigued by a recently published book by Pope Benedict XVI entitled *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*.^{xxvi}

There he explains that the historical date of Jesus' birth, according to modern research, was likely earlier than 4 B.C. and probably around 7-6 B.C., rather than what the church long claimed in setting the Western calendar. He challenges the traditional crèche arrangement as

having little basis, since Matthew's story doesn't make any reference to animals being present at Jesus' birth. Christian iconography, he explains, picked up a quotation from Isaiah, a half millennium before Jesus, that "the ox knows its owner, and the donkey its masters crib, but...my people do not understand," in order to have these two kinds of animals present at his bedside. The pope points out that the wise men weren't kings at all but magi. The Greek word in the original biblical text is cognate with "magic" and it specifically refers to members of the Persian priestly caste who were schooled in what we would now call astronomy. "The conjunction of the planets Jupiter and Saturn in the constellation Pisces in the years 7-6 B.C. ... may well have been what pointed them toward the land of Judea and to a newborn 'king of the Jews.'"

Pope Benedict then complexifies things, before finding a simplicity beyond: "The men of whom Matthew speaks were not just astronomers. They were 'wise.'" They may well have had knowledge of Hebrew Bible texts, especially Numbers 24:17, relating the prediction of the pagan prophet Balaam that a star shall come out of Jacob which will prevail over other nations. "They represent the inner dynamic of religion toward self-transcendence, which involves a search for truth...and hence 'philosophy' in the original sense of the word. Wisdom, then, serves to purify the message of 'science': the rationality of that message does not remain at the level of intellectual knowledge, but seeks understanding in its fullness, and so raises reason to its loftiest possibilities... [The Magi] are the successors of Socrates and his habit of questioning above and beyond conventional religion toward the higher truth."

Pope Benedict insists that we continue researching the scientific astronomical and the historical dimensions of this story, as well as the theological dimensions, for they are all of a part. Near the end of the book he asks, "How are we to understand all this? Are we dealing with history that actually took place, or is it merely a theological meditation, presented under the guise of stories?" His conclusion is that "we are dealing here with historical events, whose

theological significance was worked out by the Jewish Christian community and by Matthew.” That is, “Matthew is recounting real history, theologically thought through and interpreted.” I see Pope Benedict as far from a biblical literalist on the one hand and far from a debunker of theological speculation on the other. He seems to be making a genuine attempt to relate all strands of human knowledge, put them in dialogue with each other, and encourage all of us to be successors of Socrates with his habit of questioning above and beyond conventional religion toward the higher truth.

Third, the gift of myrrh is one that relates life and death. Myrrh had an alluring fragrance that was used for perfumes for the living and for embalming oil for the dead. I’ve spoken from this pulpit before of Leo Tolstoy’s character Ivan Ilyich, who struggled mightily, as he lay dying with a terminal illness at forty-five years old, with whether his whole life in retrospect had been “real” or not. He confesses to a priest three days before his death and takes communion with tears in his eyes, seeming to feel relieved of his doubts. But almost immediately afterwards, following a conversation with his wife, he says to himself, “[It’s] *not the real thing*. Everything you lived by and still live by is a lie, a deception that blinds you from the reality of life and death.”^{xxvii}

In fact, Ivan Ilyich had lived an exemplary life in many ways. He was an honest and capable attorney who became an honest and capable judge. He had a wife and two children for whom he provided well. He was strict in carrying out whatever he considered his duty, but he was also cheerful, good-natured and sociable. On the other hand, he was described as “drawn to people of high standing in society as a moth is to light.”^{xxviii} He was ambitious and vain. He enjoyed spending time with other people, but never in depth, it seemed. And he just seemed to go through the paces in his own family life, without truly giving of himself to his wife or to his children. As he got sicker and sicker, he realized there was no one who really understood and

empathized with him. He began to see what he called a basic falseness in himself and in those around him in his pleasant, conventional society. He cried out to God in his pain: “Why hast Thou done all this? Why hast Thou brought me to this? ... What have I done to Thee?”^{xxxix}

Ultimately, Ivan began to see that he’d not lived as he should have, even though his whole life had been technically correct: “His official duties, his manner of life, his family, the values adhered to by people in society and his profession – all these might not have been the real thing.”^{xxx} What finally turned it all around for him, an hour before his death, was his hand falling on his schoolboy son’s head as Ivan’s arms were flailing about and he was screaming in pain. “The boy grasped it, pressed it to his lips, and began to cry.” At that moment Ivan saw a light and realized that although his life hadn’t been what it should have been, he could still rectify the situation. “He opened his eyes and looked at his son. He grieved for him. His wife came in and went up to him. He looked at her. She gazed at him with an open mouth, with unwiped tears on her nose and cheeks, with a look of despair on her face. He grieved for her.” He spoke feebly, saying how sorry he felt for his son and for his wife and tried to ask forgiveness for himself. Instantly, his pain vanished and his life seemed real. His fear of death disappeared too. “So that’s it!” he exclaimed. “What bliss!”^{xxxi}

Of course, if Ivan Ilyich could have expressed this kind of love much earlier in his life, and experienced it reciprocated, he would have lived very differently, been more fulfilled, and not have experienced the agony of sensing that his life hadn’t been the real thing at all. But it took facing death for Ivan Ilyich to realize how he should have lived. For most of his days he just went along with a commonplace life, which Tolstoy’s narrator tells us in fact was most horrifying.^{xxxii} I think the answer for the rest of us alive here now is to live with an active realization of our mortality – to live with death on our shoulder – so that we appreciate the fragility and preciousness of each day and don’t waste it in not being real. That means in not

being loving – in not prioritizing love for our family, our friends, our neighbors, and even our enemies as the most important value of all.

So, in conclusion, let's bring our own gifts of gold, frankincense and myrrh to our Savior, to the One who can help us make our lives the real thing, today and every day. Let's turn away from materialism, grow up our faith, and live every day as if it's our last. Then, perhaps, true Morning Star, we may evermore your splendor see. Then, perhaps, we may experience holy joy, pure and free, forevermore.^{xxxiii}

BENEDICTION

What love is this that judges all and condemns none?

That is complete in itself and yearns for us?

That empties itself of power and conquers all evil?

That is silent as light and answers every cry?

That is divinity itself and wrapped in flesh? AMEN.

Virginia Rickeman

NOTES

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- ⁱ *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1995), pp. 267, 341.
- ⁱⁱ Isaiah 60:1-6.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Matthew 2:1-12.
- ^{iv} Harold W. Attridge (ed.), *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (San Francisco, HarperOne, 2006), p. 912.
- ^v Isaiah 60:1.
- ^{vi} *HarperCollins Study Bible*, p. 989.
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*, p. 914.
- ^{viii} *Interpreter's Bible* (New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951), Vol. VI, p. 509.
- ^{ix} Clint Pumphrey, "What Are Frankincense and Myrrh?" <http://science.howstuffworks.com/life/botany/question283.htm>
- ^x Isaiah 60:6.
- ^{xi} Pumphrey, "Frankincense and Myrrh."
- ^{xii} *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 481.
- ^{xiii} *New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. VIII, p. 143.
- ^{xiv} Pumphrey, "Frankincense and Myrrh;" Biblical Archaeology Society, "Why Did the Magi Bring Gold, Frankincense and Myrrh?" <http://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/peoples-cultures-in-the-bible/jesus-historical-jesus/why-did-the-magi-bring-gold-frankincense-and-myrrh/>
- ^{xv} *Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VII, p. 259.
- ^{xvi} *New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. VIII, p. 143.
- ^{xvii} As cited in Martin L. Smith, "Wiser Than We Think," *Sojourners Magazine* (January, 2013), p. 48.
- ^{xviii} Genesis 13:2.
- ^{xix} Exodus 25:10-22.
- ^{xx} First Kings 6:14-22.
- ^{xxi} Exodus 32.
- ^{xxii} Helen Kennedy, "Occupy Wall Street Protesters March Golden Calf Named Greed Around Zuccotti Square," *New York Daily News*, October 9, 2011.
- ^{xxiii} Donna Schaper, "Occupy Wall Street, the Golden Calf, and the New Idolatry", *Huffington Post* (October 11, 2011).
- ^{xxiv} Martin L. Smith, "Wiser", p. 48.
- ^{xxv} Sources of Insight, "Simplicity Quotes," <http://sourcesofinsight.com/simplicity-quotes/>
- ^{xxvi} Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives* (New York, Image, 2012). Please note that I have used a Kindle edition of this book, which does not add pagination, so I am unable to note the location of ideas and quotations that follow in my sermon.
- ^{xxvii} Leo Tolstoy, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich* (New York: Bantam, 1981), p. 128.
- ^{xxviii} *Ibid.*, p. 50.
- ^{xxix} *Ibid.*, p. 118.
- ^{xxx} *Ibid.*, p. 127.
- ^{xxxi} *Ibid.*, p. 133.

^{xxxii} Ibid., p. 49.

^{xxxiii} William C. Dix, “As With Gladness Those of Old” (hymn).